



Take Me Back by Frick6101719

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Summary: "The Chief and her... they've screwed before, huh?" A series of connected one-shots tracking Joyce and Hopper's relationship from high school smoke buddies to the realization that there's something distinctly UN-platonic between them. Basically, this is my idea of just WHAT went down in their past that gives them the charged and complicated dynamic we see on the show.

1. We ran, we just ran

Hello and welcome! As I'm sure you saw in the description, in this fic I'm hoping to piece together something of a canon-compliant story of just what Joyce and Hop's history is that gives them the super interesting relationship on the show, especially when they meet. I mean, in 1x01 they're not *friends* exactly, but there's obviously some history there. And come on THE CHEMISTRY? So what happened?

I don't know. But after some re-watching and scouring Tumblr and sitting alone in a dimly lit room with my chin resting on my steepled fingers, I have some ideas about what *might* have gone down.

And I hope you like it!

For fifteen-year-old Joyce Horowitz, it isn't the nicotine that makes smoking addictive so much as it's the picture of her mother's infuriated face behind her closed eyelids, glowing bright with every forbidden drag. Vera Horowitz hardly gave a flying fuck about anything her daughter did, but after finding out her ex-husband let Joyce smoke it became her mission to swat every Camel, Marlboro, or Lucky Strike out of her daughter's hands while screeching about how Joyce is such an ungrateful little brat.

Joyce can't afford to be too picky, then, about where and when and what she smokes—not when getting caught with cigs at home meant Vera would likely lock the fridge and forbid her dinner—so bumming a smoke at school from friends and sneaking off to the bathroom or the front steps to light up became the only way to get her fix and go to bed with a full belly.

Which is how she ended up striking up a... friendship, she supposed, with a bit of an unlikely boy.

"James Francis Hopper?"

"Fuck me!" He laughs. "Do you think my parents hate me?"

Joyce tries to stifle her laugh as Jim passes her his cigarette, but ends

up choking on the smoke from the high-tar Lucky Strike when she can't quite stop the giggles.

"Easy, Joycie," Jim says, reaching for the smoke before she's even gotten a real puff. "You need to learn to smoke like an adult."

Joyce keeps the cigarette from his long reach, this time inhaling smoothly and refusing to cough even when her throat tickles from the dense smoke. "James Archibald Hopper. That's gotta be it; it rolls right off the tongue."

Jim snatches the cigarette from her hand, shaking his head and chuckling. "I'm never going to tell you, but it definitely isn't that."

"What about... James Leopold Hopper?" She tries, leaning back against one of the support beams for the stairs and tucking her knees to her chest. "That's a nice, regal-sounding name."

"Yeah, maybe if I was some blue blood from 'Mother England,'" he jokes. "Anyone named Leopold in Hawkins needs to be punched in the face."

Joyce snorts, and Jim hands her the cigarette. "Why? Just to keep him humble?"

"Exactly. Leopolds are universal tightwads." He raises an eyebrow at her. "What about you? Joyce... Elizabeth Horowitz. Is that right?"

"Good try, but no. You'll never guess mine either."

"Oh, you could guess mine pretty easily, I'd just never tell you," Jim corrects. "Joyce Gertrude Horowitz. I feel good about that one."

She shakes her head. "Nope. Way more out-of-the-box than that."

Jim hums thoughtfully, but Joyce can tell he's losing interest in this little game. And the odds are stacked against him; there's just no way he'll think to guess a name like Adina.

The Lucky is nearly down to the filter by this point, and Joyce can't help but dread the inevitable return to school and sixth-period-P.E. that she knows is coming in a few more minutes. They'll be playing

basketball—just like they have been all week—and while Joyce isn't terribly un-athletic, basketball is definitely not a sport designed for rail-thin girls who stand barely five-foot-three, and she wouldn't mind never having to play it again. Plus, yesterday someone threw her the ball when she wasn't ready and it smashed right into her left middle finger. She'd had to go to the nurse to get it taped and iced and it hurt like a total bitch, even still. Part of her wishes it was her right hand—then maybe she'd be able to get out of class because she couldn't take notes.

She steals a look at Jim from the corner of her eye as he stubs the end of the cigarette on the steps above them. She would like school a whole lot more if Jim was in her grade, and she could have even a class or two with him. Obviously Jim would never be in her P.E. class—though she'd bet he's a shade or two better at basketball than she is based off his height alone—but still, she can easily imagine sitting in front of him in science, or especially in English, trying not to laugh at the jokes about Mr. Cooper's comb-over that he would whisper to her just quietly enough so the teacher couldn't hear.

It's not that she doesn't have friends at Hawkins High, of course. Well, she's no Homecoming Queen, but she has Sandra Derkins and Pauline Goffmann and even Jeanine Michales, when she isn't dating some boy or other who takes up all her time, but none of those girls are as cool as Jim Hopper.

Everyone at Hawkins High likes Jim; even the teachers who often give him hell for arriving late or a smidge high can't help but be dazzled by his smiles and winks as he charms his way out of detention after detention. Jim isn't popular, exactly, and he's flirted with one too many football player's girlfriend to ever really crack that inner circle, but very few people dislike him, and his devil-may-care attitude is more than a hit with the girls, Joyce knows.

She also knows it's a bit of a farce, she thinks smugly. Oh, he skips class and hands in assignments as late as he can, but Jim Hopper is secretly a smart and hard-working guy. He let it slip just the other day that he's got a 3.2 GPA—he's practically a nerd.

"What are you looking at?" Jim asks her, stretching his legs out and running a hand through his hair, completely ruining any semblance

of tidiness to the sandy blond strands.

I suppose he's handsome enough, in a can't-be-bothered kind of way, Joyce thinks, though she just rolls her eyes and tries not to blush at being caught staring. "Nothing, nothing. I just thought you missed a spot shaving," she says, tapping her jaw. She hopes he actually shaves. He must, right?

Jeanine is so boy-crazy that the first time she saw Joyce and Hopper emerge from beneath the steps, she had practically pounced on Joyce and demanded to know if she'd been "rounding the bases with a SENIOR BOY." Joyce hadn't quite known what that meant, but she had denied it vividly and completely, not that that had shut Jeanine up about it. It was kind of weird that Jeanine thought there was anything between her and Jim... and worse that the other girls never seemed to take Joyce's side about it. She hardly ever even saw him except for during break between fifth and sixth, and while he would smile and nod in her direction if they passed in the hallway or on Main street, it's not like they were inseparable pals.

"So did you decide to ask Chrissy to Prom?" She asks, while Jim pokes his head outside to check the time on the school clock.

"Nah, I don't think I'm going to go after all. It's kind of dumb, you know?" He says, leaning back once more and resting his hands behind his head.

"Prom is dumb?" Maybe it's the fact that she's only a sophomore, but Joyce thinks Prom is anything but dumb. It's the one night for magic in all of this miserable high school experience!

"Yeah, it's dumb. Like you rent a dumb suit that doesn't fit—and probably itches—so you can dance badly in a room full of sweaty teenagers just to get laid by a girl you've screwed at least dozen times." He looks at her sidelong, like he's said more than he meant to. "Sorry."

"I'm not a kid; I get how it is." She almost winces at how juvenile she sounds. "Still. It's a once-in-a-lifetime thing. You'd maybe regret never going if you just skip it because you think it's dumb."

Jim shrugs, and suddenly it dawns on her.

"Oh damn," she starts to laugh. "Chrissy Carpenter turned you down, didn't she?"

Jim gives her a dirty look, which only makes her laugh harder. He pulls out another cigarette from the pocket of his denim jacket. "Shut up."

"Well I'm not surprised she did, not if you made it sound as glamorous as you did just now," Joyce points out. "There's not a girl in the world who would agree to go to Prom with you if she thought you were doing it just to screw her yet again."

Jim takes a long drag, giving her a pitying look. "That's the problem with you girls: you all think you can speak for all women everywhere. But there are plenty of girls who don't care about that; Chrissy's just real different from you."

"Oh yeah? How do you figure?" Joyce asks, crossing her arms, careful not to squish her injured finger.

"Well... you know, she's done stuff. She's been out in the real world and she's not naïve anymore."

Joyce huffs as she accepts the cigarette that doesn't do anything to soften his words. "I'm not naïve either. And Chrissy is only two years older than me—same as you." Two-and-a-half, technically, since Joyce is a fall baby and Jim turned eighteen in February.

"Okay maybe you're not all that naïve, for a fifteen-year-old," he concedes grudgingly. He knows enough about her home life to know she doesn't see life through rose-coloured glasses. "But you're still young, and you would never do some of the things Chrissy's done," he says with a fond sort of smile that makes Joyce's stomach turn.

"Like screw a guy in the back of his dad's car?" Joyce fires, taking a second drag before handing it back. "I would so. Just because I haven't doesn't mean that I wouldn't," she says. "If it was the right guy, I mean."

"Riiight," Jim says, raising an eyebrow. "Have you ever even smoked

pot, Joycie?"

"I've smoked pot with you!" She exclaims. "Remember? It was last summer, at that party Derek Derkins threw when his parents were in Michigan." It was the first time Joyce had ever had pot, and she hardly felt a thing. She'd been at Sandra's for a sleep-over when her older brother Derek decided to have a bunch of friends over, and they had been thrilled for a chance to hang out with the older kids at Hawkins High. That was the night she met Jim too... sort of, as he'd been high as a kite by the time Derek introduced him to his kid sister and her friend Joyce.

"Oh yeah!" He laughs. "I had forgotten about that party. Isn't that the time Benny Hammond put his arm through the window in the kitchen?"

It certainly was. Joyce had never seen so much blood, and Sandra had nearly fainted. "That's the one."

He blows out a puff of smoke, grinning. "Well, my point still stands: you're nothing like Chrissy."

"Yeah well we're more alike than you thought," Joyce insists, not sure why this is a big deal. Her mother always tells her she's too stubborn and obsessive. "And my point still stands: she didn't say yes to Prom because you were a total caveman when you asked her."

"I'll have you know I was a perfect gentleman," Hopper says, badly faking a British accent.

"Okay there, Leopold." Joyce rolls her eyes. "Just remember what I said before you get turned down by every other single girl in Hawkins."

From the corner of her eye, she can see his smug, self-satisfied smirk. "Oh don't you worry; there's a B-list that I'm sure will be willing."

"You're terrible," she says, grabbing the cigarette. A slow smile grows on her face, despite herself. "Although, if you're talking about Janice Belscher, then I know she's had a total crush on you for years but she's also a Sophomore. That would be real low-hanging fruit, even

for you."

"You're a Sophomore," he points out.

"Yeah, but I'm not going to fall over myself the second some boy who only wants one thing asks me to Prom, just because I want to be the only Sophomore there. I have standards."

"Right," Jim says. "Because you're no longer naïve."

"Right."

"Ah Joycie," he chuckles. "You have so much to learn."

"Not about this," Joyce says firmly. Watching her parents fight viciously for her entire childhood made her very wary about the sort of boys she dates. Not that she's had many dates... really, there was only Frank Sattler for two months in freshman year, before he told her he needed to focus on his studies. But that's because she's picky.

The warning bell rings for the start of sixth period, and a quiet sigh escapes Joyce's body before she even realises it.

Jim nudges her with his elbow, gingerly taking the Lucky from her injured hand. "Basketball again?"

Joyce nods pitifully. "I'm just hoping I can get out of it because of this," she holds up her bandaged hand. "How am I supposed to play with one hand?"

"From the sounds of it, you can hardly be worse than you were when you were whole."

She swats him with her good hand, but laughs because, well, he's probably right. "That's not a very nice thing to—wait, do you hear that?"

"If this is going to be another joke about-

"Hey! Who's down there?"

Like a fire had been lit under their asses, Jim and Joyce bolt upright

and deadly still as they hear footsteps pounding on the stairs.

"Shit, it's Cooper," Jim hisses around the cigarette. "Go, GO."

His long legs take him away from the scene of the crime much faster than Joyce's, and with her heart in her throat she turns and sees Mr. Cooper barreling towards them, stringy hair whipping around a tomato-red face as he shouts. "Hey! Hey, get back here! Get back here you two, you have class in two minutes!"

They don't slow down, but race full-tilt towards the woods at the edge of the property. Once she realises that the heavy-set Mr. Cooper will not be chasing them further than a few steps, Joyce's panic turns into hysteria as she laughs and flies after Jim.

He stops just inside the cover of the trees, panting, with the cigarette stub still dangling from his lips. "Holy shit; he came out of nowhere!"

Joyce can't stop laughing, holding her sides. "You should have seen his face! I thought his head was going to explode!"

Jim rests his hands on his knees, grinning and shaking his head. "What the fuck, right?"

She slumps to the ground, smoothing her hair back from her face, unable to suppress her smile. She barely notices the sharp pain it causes in her hand, and completely ignores the fact that she's messing up her best hair day this week. "I guess I'll be missing basketball after all," she says, then dissolves into another fit of giggles.

Hopper drags on the Lucky, then stubs it into the tree and laughs the smoke from his nose. "I guess so."

She sits back, resting her palms on the ground. Her trousers are probably going to have dirt staining her butt, but she doesn't care. She might as well play hooky for the rest of the day now, and who has she got to impress, Hopper? "So what now? We can't go back!"

"No; Cooper'll be patrolling to see if he can catch us sneaking back. Do you think he saw it was us?"

"Come on Hop; he's old, but not blind."

"Well how close was he? We ran pretty fast!"

"Not so fast he couldn't see us. And if he asks anyone 'hey who was the tall boy and shrimpy girl I saw smoking under the stairs?' all it will take is one snitch because everyone knows that's us. We're there every day."

Joyce bounces back and forth between loving the friendliness of life in such a small town and absolutely hating the lack of privacy it provides. Later, she thinks, she'll be annoyed to no end by her lack of anonymity. But right now all she can do is laugh.

Jim looks on the verge of arguing, then thinks better of it, instead popping the top two buttons of his green and orange plaid shirt. "Well we definitely can't go back," he says. "So I guess we have free period until seventh. Or we just skip seventh."

"I can't skip seventh," Joyce says. "I have Math and I already skipped on Tuesday. We're doing special triangles or something and I have no idea what's going on."

"Okay, so we'll be back in time for seventh," Jim says. "Hey, have you been to that new store downtown... Melvin's, or something? We could go check it out."

"I think it's Melvald's," Joyce says. She's been thinking about applying for a job there, since they've just opened and must be needing help. "No, I haven't been there yet."

"Well come on then, let's go. We'll see if there's anything good there; George told me they have a ton of magazines and a whole shelf of chewing gum. We can find out if he's full of shit, as usual."

She hesitates. It's always the worst feeling to have to explain that you really can't afford to buy something so small as a stick of gum. It's hard enough having to hide the fraying sleeves of her sweaters from where she picks at them, or to sweat in her corduroy trousers in May because her mother won't let her leave the house in her old spring dresses. Joyce is still short, but she's grown probably four inches since she got the dresses from her cousin and they hit just above her knee now, prompting Vera Horowitz to declare she "didn't raise no

hussy" and confine her to pants.

Looking at Jim, it's like he can read all this on her face. And maybe he can; it's not like Joyce hasn't complained about the heat and her bitch of a mother to him a dozen times before.

"Come on," he says, gesturing for her to follow him. "It's on me. It'll be fun."

"Oh, no, thanks Hopper, but it's okay. I'll just look around." She smiles. "That will be fun enough."

"No I mean it. You'll have a whole shelf of flavours to choose from and you have to try at least one."

Her heart swells a little. "Thanks Jim, but I already bum your smokes —"

"I insist," he says, turning to walk away. "I'm practically rich now, since my grandpa sent me that graduation money. And I told you I'm going to work for my uncle at the steel mill in Lake County this summer making a buck fifty an hour, right?"

Joyce smiles, lurching to her feet to catch up. "You'll be actually rich by the time September rolls around," she says, practically jogging to keep pace. "Well thanks again, Hop. I mean, I know you're only doing this to practice being a gentleman for when you ask your poor B-list girl to Prom, but still."

Jim chuckles, looking up at the sky as it appears beyond the trees. "Sure Joycie. Whatever you say."

6101719: A couple of things: 1) I'm Canadian, and I spell like it. It's hard enough having to figure out inches and feet and Fahrenheit and I will, under no circumstances, spell words like colour without the necessary "u." It would be just dishonourable.

2) I have overruled the wiki, which is wrong about so many things, I have learned, in the years Joyce and Hopper are born in. While I've kept Joyce at the wiki-recommended '48, Hopper I switched to '46 to keep faith with the fact that we know they went to high school

together. While I realised after the fact that this makes Joyce ten years younger than Winona, which I don't exactly support, I've kept it because it makes sense with where I'm going with some other parts of this fic... stay tuned.

3) As you maybe can see, I'm trying to keep this as tight to canon as possible, so if you notice any inconsistencies then I would really appreciate it if you let me know! You're also always welcome (ENCOURAGED even) to let me know other feelings you have about this fic, as reviews of all kinds are appreciated.

Thanks, all. Much love.

2. Night Moves

November 1963

Hop is back for the first time since graduation, and he has been missed more than he realised.

Jim can't quite sort the feeling taking hold in his gut while he pulls into Hawkins High for the first time in five long months, but it's possible it isn't all bad. Partly he feels nostalgic, thinking back on all the time he spent here, but he also feels a sharp sense of satisfaction to have moved beyond this place and all those in it, to never have to walk through those front doors again if he doesn't want to.

He pulls into the parking lot, tires crunching on the frost-encrusted leaves as he spins to a stop. He takes a moment to bask in the joy, now feeling like a returning conqueror as he pulls the keys from the ignition of his '62 Impala, cutting off the radio.

He *had* planned on coming back for Homecoming; Gary is only about a hundred miles from Hawkins, after all, and Uncle Geoff had told him that his car was available anytime Jim wanted to make the trip home. He'd been working hard all summer and decided to stay on at the mill into the fall, and Homecoming seemed like the perfect time to get back and visit his friends and see his folks.

Then all that went out the window when he found out about the barely-driven Impala for sale at a knockdown price at a garage in Gary; he knew he needed to keep up his sixty hour work week and *then* some to make her his as soon as possible.

And she *is* a sweet thing, Jim thinks tenderly, with a convertible roof, all that chrome trim, and a stunning 380 brake horsepower engine. He wasn't a huge fan of the bronzey-brown colour, at first, but as soon as he was handed the keys for the first time he practically fell in love.

It's all worth it, in the end, because really, Thanksgiving is a more important holiday even if it *is* over a month later. Plus, in light of all

the extra hours he's been putting in at work, they've agreed to give him the whole long weekend, starting with getting off at noon today.

Jim checks his watch as he strides towards the entrance to the school. It reads 3:38, so he has seven minutes until school lets out and he can pick up his cousin Donnie, like he promised his parents and Aunt Shirley.

He pulls his jacket closer around his body, eager to get inside and onto one of the benches outside the principal's office to wait for Donnie. He chuckles to himself as he imagines the face of the secretary—Ms. Tait—when she sees him sitting there again like he never even left. He wasn't especially a troublemaker... but there were a number of miscommunications, he supposes, that ended with frequent trips down the hall to visit Principal Amon. Thankfully he'd always had a knack for talking his way out of trouble.

The scent of tobacco wafts up at him as one boot lands on the steps, and Jim breathes it in deeply, fond memories popping into his head. Then, over the quiet whistling of the wind, he hears a soft sniff from below, and stops in his tracks. Another sniff—and was that a sob?

He climbs back down and marches to the other side of the steps—the hollow side—and spots a familiar-yet-somehow-not-familiar face.

"Hop!" Joyce starts, quickly looking away and wiping her face with her mittens. When she turns back to him she's smiling around a cigarette. "They make a mistake letting you leave? I always knew that it had to be a joke that you graduated."

The smile that crawls onto his face is warmer than he's worn in a while. She looks different than last time he saw her: older, and the unruly brown hair that she and Sandra Derkins had bleached with lemon juice in June is now cut short and dyed a shade darker than her natural colour. Even with her cap tugged over her ears, the bangs and the sharp flip at her jaw give her a very mod look. And that eyeliner makes it look even a little bit tough. "Amon called me, begging me to come back and teach you young things the way of the big wide world." Without thinking about it much, he slips into his old seat on the step supports, leaning against a beam. "But I see I've done a good enough job teaching *you* the importance of skipping class

every once in a while," he says, reaching for her cigarette with a smirk.

Her smile is a touch brighter, too, as she hands it to him. He spies the pack poking out of her old wool coat and frowns. "Marlboros, huh? You like your smokes that watered down?" He takes a drag, handing it back to her.

"I know, I know, no Luckys. But these were always my favourite, and I can afford my own now," she says, lifting her chin proudly. "I got a job at Melvald's for the summer, and I was working real good hours. They even kept me part-time for the school year."

"Not bad at all. Well, welcome to the working class," he says, pretending to raise a glass in a toast. "What does your mom say about the smoking"

"Oh, she still screams and hollers." Her voice is steady, but the slight twitch of a muscle in her chin reveals that things haven't really gotten better between Joyce and Vera Horowitz. A number of times that they met out here Joyce was fit to bursting—even by that time of day—with anger at something her witch of a mother had done that morning. Jim had heard stories that made his fights with *his* parents seem practically endearing. "But I'm buying all my own shit now, practically, so we have something of an arrangement: she puts food on the table and doesn't have to buy me shoes and shirts, and I smoke out the window." She sniffs again, rubbing her nose. "And at school, of course."

"I can see that," Jim says slowly. "But why skip last period to sit out here? Why not hit the road, go into town or go home early for the long weekend?" Jim isn't totally sure where Joyce lives, or how far from school, but he knows she always used to walk to and from Hawkins High. She could go anywhere from here. Why didn't she?

"Too fuckin' cold," Joyce says, her voice clipped. "Pauline has been giving me rides since the temperature dropped. I'd freeze to death otherwise."

He had noticed she wasn't really dressed for walking in this weather; her tweed skirt, striped sweater, and knitted cap are sensible enough,

he supposes, but her dark green tights look threadbare, as does her dad's old, giant WWII coat, and instead of any kind of boot she wears Chucks at least a size too big lined with plastic bags and her wool socks folded overtop. Jim can only see the bags because one has come untucked.

But it's fifteen degrees out here—colder than it has any business being in *November*—and she keeps rubbing her calves to keep warm. Jim's freezing too, and he just got out of his car.

Joyce folds her knees to hide her feet from his gaze, and he can't tell if it's subconscious or not. "Anyway, I might just end up walking home after all." She hands him her cigarette again.

He pushes it back at her. "I've got the feeling you need that more than me right now." He pulls out his own pack, and Joyce gasps.

"Camels! You're not smoking Luckys anymore either?"

Jim shrugs, smiling as he pulls a cigarette from the pack. "Nah, I started smoking these this summer when my uncle kept buying the wrong ones." Uncle Geoff was a kind man of few words, a hard-working, blue-collar American through and through. And anytime Jim cleaned up his apartment, or brought the car back with a full tank, a pack of Camels was the way Geoff showed his gratitude, and Jim never had the heart to point out that he wasn't in the habit of smoking them.

Jim leans forward, cigarette held in his teeth, and after a short pause and his raised eyebrows, Joyce starts fumbling in her pockets for her lighter. He can feel his, pressed on his left hip as usual, so he's not sure what made him wait for hers. It's not like he doesn't light his own smokes every other day of his life.

"So... so I guess you just developed a taste for them?" Joyce says, relaxing a tad when she at least gets the thing lit on the first try. She blocks the wind with her hand, scooting forward to bring the flame to the end of the cigarette while her own stays held between her lips.

Jim holds still while she lights it, noticing the tiniest tremor in her hands. "Yeah, and now I don't think I'll ever go back."

Joyce meets his gaze just then with unusual directness, and for a moment Jim gets a glimpse of the emotions roiling beneath the surface of her brown eyes. Why was she out here crying in the freezing cold?

"How come you weren't back for Homecoming?" she asks, looking away.

Jim perks up. "I needed to work the extra hours." He leans back, unable to fight his grin. "You might have thought you heard a tiger in the parking lot just a few minutes ago, but I'll have you know that's my new baby—a 1962 Chevy Impala."

Joyce raises her eyebrows, then gives some mock applause while Jim sits there beaming. "Well congratulations."

"Thank you. I feel like a proud father."

She smiles. "You boys and your toys..."

Then her lip trembles, and she starts to cry.

Jim is so shocked he just stares at her for a long ten seconds. *What did I do?* "Joyce," he says, finally recovering. "Joycie, hey," he moves closer, trying to peer into her face which is pressed down into her mittens. He notices the left one has a quarter-sized hole unravelling in the thumb. "What is it? What did I say?"

She composes herself quickly; when she lifts her face a moment later, her tears have stopped, and her eyes aren't even red. Her chin still quivers a little, and she sniffs pitifully a few times, but the brief, alarming outburst seems to be over. Her cigarette is nearly finished, but she takes one long drag, holding her breath while she tosses the stub into the snow. "It's nothing... it's just..." she raises her arms then drops them to her lap, her voice cracking. "It's been a *shit* day, Hop. On top of a *shit* week."

Her breathing starts coming heavier again, and Jim isn't sure what to do. This was always the part of his relationship with girls he tried to avoid, and he's certainly never had to deal with tears from a girl he's not sleeping with. "Well, what happened?"

"It's kind of a long story," she says, wrapping her arms around her middle now. "And it's so dumb... just about a dumb boy and especially my *dumb* friends." She looks up at him again, and this time he sees more than a flash of emotion in her eyes. She's hurt, and *furious*. "Do you ever not like your friends so much?"

He half smiles. "Sometimes. What happened?"

She sighs. "It's just... do you remember Henry Lloyd?"

Jim nods. "Yeah, he's a senior this year, right?"

"Right. Well, Pauline heard from George Burness—you know him? He's real close with Henry—that Henry was into me, I guess. She told me at lunch one day a couple of weeks ago when we were sitting with Jeanine, and they were both really excited, saying how they were going to help me get him because they knew that I'd had a crush on him, or whatever, since the Fair on Labour Day weekend." She bites her lip, closing her eyes tight. "So things seem to be going well, until all of a sudden Henry asks Jeanine out, and she says yes. She'd been spending some time with him since they sit near each other in Science class, but I thought she was talking me up to him, since that's what Pauline said she was doing and Pauline is her lab buddy.

"But then today I find out from Pauline that she *knew* Jeanine was just flirting with Henry, but didn't tell me because I 'need to learn to chase after boys myself.'" Joyce takes another deep, steadying breath. "And they both think that they haven't done anything really wrong, and that I should just get over it. Even Sandra won't take my side about it because she wasn't there at lunch that day, and we sit on the opposite side of the class in science from the others, *and* because she says she *does* think I'm a little too shy with boys."

It's a lot to take in, and Jim is a bit overwhelmed. He takes a puff from his cigarette, stalling a little while he thinks. "That's... that's really rough."

Joyce nods. "Fucking bitches." Then, unexpectedly, she grins. "And I told them to their faces."

Jim's eyes go wide. "You called them fucking bitches to their faces?"

Joyce nods, though now her smile is flickering, and her eyes watering. "Yeah," she wipes the tears away as they fall. "Not Sandra, specifically. But the other two. And Pauline called me an unhinged nutcase, and Jeanine called me a two-faced, psycho slut, which doesn't even make sense because *I* wasn't the one lying to my friends and *throwing* myself at Henry! Plus Jeanine knows I've never..." she trails off, wiping her nose on her sleeve. "Anyway. I'm skipping science right now because I can't stand to even *look* at them."

Science used to be her favourite class, Jim remembers. She never used to skip it. "Well, at least it's Thanksgiving," he offers, "and you won't have to see any of them for almost a week."

"Yeah, and then I'll spend the holiday holed up at home with my *loving* mother," she says bitterly. "And I feel so..." she sighs, "so stupid, because obviously everyone in the country is still shaken up, and it's Thanksgiving so we're all supposed to be thankful that no one shot *us* dead while we were driving around, but here I am skipping class and bawling because my friends were mean to me."

"I know what you mean, actually," Jim says, taking a drag, and offering her his cigarette. Joyce waves it away. "This girl that I had kind of been seeing called me that night and said we couldn't see each other anymore. She said Kennedy's death just reminded her that life is short and all that shit, and she needed to focus on the big picture." He shrugs, though it still stings to remember being outright told that you're not good enough to be in someone's "big picture." Especially when he'd been driving to Chicago to see her every Sunday—his only day off—for two months now. "I was so pissed, it was like nothing else about JFK being shot mattered except that this girl dumped me because of it. I didn't think about Mrs. Kennedy, or their kids, or the whole damn country being a mess, just me."

Joyce nods. "Exactly. It just feels like there's so much more important crap than this but it still just *sucks*."

Over their heads, the bell rings, signalling the end of school for the day. Joyce looks up, then sighs once more. "But I'd rather *be* shot dead than sit in a car with Pauline right now though," she says, and

when she looks back at Jim her eyes are clear. "She can go straight to hell."

Jim laughs, and even Joyce cracks a smile. He stands, ducking his head to exit the steps, then offers his hand. "Well, if you want, I can drive you home." He takes another look at her shoes as he helps her stand, deciding he won't take no for an answer. "I'm here to pick up Donnie as a favour to my aunt, who's madly making stuffing and cranberry sauce for tomorrow and can't come get him." He steps away from the stairs to give his cousin a chance to see him when he leaves the building, and looks at Joyce. "It'll give me a chance to show off my *new* girl." He wiggles his eyebrows. "You can even pick the radio station."

"Ooh, she *sings* too?" Joyce asks, shoving her hands in her pockets. "Colour me impressed. How can I say no to that?"

"You really can't," Jim replies, waving his hand as he sees Donnie looking around from the middle of the doorway, blocking the exit for the horde behind him, who immediately start shoving. "Donald!" He shouts, waving his arm above his head at the freshman.

Donnie grabs his books tighter and rushes down the steps, brushing his hair back from his face. He smiles up at Jim. "Wow, hi Jim! Mom didn't tell me you were coming home for Thanksgiving this year!"

"It's always nice to be a pleasant surprise," he says, grinning. "Donnie, are you going to introduce yourself to the lady?"

As if seeing Joyce for the first time, Donnie tries to reach out his hand but ends up dropping a textbook, then another as he tries to catch it. Soon half of his supplies are on the ground. "Oh... darn it!" He bends to grab it all quickly, but when Jim clears his throat he stands straight, sheepishly holding out his hand again. "I'm Donald, but most people call me Donnie."

Joyce bites her lip and takes his hand, shaking it firmly. "I'm Joyce. Nice to meet you."

"But most people call her Joycie," Jim adds, grinning down at Joyce while Donnie scrambles once more to gather his school supplies.

"Don't they, Joycie?"

"No, they do not," Joyce says, glaring at him while she helps the younger boy gather his textbooks. She holds on to two of them, knowing he's overloaded. "Not if they like their teeth *in* their head," she whispers, so only Jim can hear.

He laughs, bumping her with his shoulder. Not very hard, mind, but Joyce is much smaller than he is and she practically goes flying, catching herself on the bike rack.

Donnie's jaw drops when he sees Jim's new car looking between his cousin and the vehicle as if waiting for Jim to tell him to quit being so gullible and of course his *actual* car is that beater in the corner of the lot. But Jim just grins at the boy's reverential stare, patting the soft top above the driver's door. "She's sweet, huh?"

Donnie nods, eyes still huge. "Is it a sixty-three?"

"Sixty-two," Jim says proudly. "Barely driven, so I got her for a song."

Donnie adjusts the books in his arms to reach for the door. He holds it open for Joyce, smiling politely, but Jim frowns.

"Not happening," he barks. "Ladies get the front, squirt."

Abashed, Donnie climbs in the backseat, putting the stack of school supplies beside him on the bench. Jim swings into the driver's seat as Joyce slides in beside him, biting back a smile. "I'll bet that's the first time you've tried to keep a girl *out* of your backseat."

Jim starts the car, grinning at her. "She hasn't been broken in like *that* yet, but oh, that day will come."

"Broken in like what?" Donnie asks, sticking his head between the seats. "You've never had anyone sit in the back? Am I the very first?"

"Yeah kid, you sure are the first to *take a ride* in the back," Joyce says mischievously. She raises an eyebrow in Hopper's direction. "Not the last, though, I'm sure"

He nods. "Maybe one day I'll even get a ride back there," he says

seriously.

Donnie frowns. "Why would you ride in your own backseat?"

"No better place, kid, trust me."

Joyce snorts, covering her mouth to stifle her laughter.

"To be sure, it can get bumpy back there," he says, watching Joyce from the corner of his eye. "And it's not exactly glamorous, but it has its charms. A bit less spacious than some, but if you know what you're doing you can sure make the most of it."

Joyce swats his arm. "Hop!"

"What?" He leans in, whispering: "I can keep going."

"I think we've had enough car sex metaphors," Joyce whispers back. "You're going to scar the poor kid."

"He's thirteen, not three," he says, scoffing. "It's not like he doesn't think about sex. There isn't a thirteen-year-old boy in the country who wouldn't jump at the chance to have sex in the back of *any* car, let alone one this sexy."

"Okay, that's an exaggeration," Joyce says, looking quickly over her shoulder. "Besides, I'm pretty sure he's fourteen. Freshmen have to be fourteen."

"Even better. Fourteen-year-old boys are even randier than thirteen-year-old ones."

Joyce sits back in her chair. "You are impossible." She points out the window. "Turn left here."

Donnie, seeming to understand that they're finally done whispering about him, leans forward again. "So, Joyce, are you coming to Uncle Fred and Aunt Mary's for Thanksgiving tomorrow?"

Jim raises his eyebrows, trying to catch Donnie's eye in the mirror, but his cousin is busy staring at Joyce, completely enraptured, and doesn't notice.

Joyce hesitates. "No... no my mom and I are going to get my grandpa from Indianapolis and bring him home for dinner tomorrow. We'll probably all listen to the game, too." She turns around in her seat to face him. "Does your family have a big get-together for the holiday?"

Donnie once again seems confused, but nods. "Yeah... we usually spend the whole day at the Hoppers'—my family, and our cousins from West Virginia come up for the weekend too. We play football or something, when it's not so cold, and then there's so much food we're eating leftovers all weekend." A mischievous grin creeps onto his face. "Jim even brought us beer last year!"

"And Jim told you that that had to stay *strictly confidential*," he says, pointing at his cousin in the mirror. "It's hard enough for *me* to get my hands on booze, and it'll only get worse if either of our mothers find out about it."

"That sounds like a really good time." Joyce points at another street, and Jim turns. "Maybe it will warm up enough for you to play football, too. This cold spell is killing us all, but it can't last forever. It's the second right up there, Hop."

He obliges.

"So... you're not going to be there for any of it?" Donnie looks between the two of them. "Wait, aren't you guys... courting?"

Jim bursts out laughing, and from the corner of his eye he can see Joyce biting her lip, trying not to laugh at the poor kid too. "No, we are not *courting*," he says, trying to make the word sound as high-brow as possible. "Jeez, don't you think I'd have been around more this fall if I'd been 'courting' a girl in Hawkins?"

"No," Joyce answers quickly, on Donnie's behalf. "I mean, you'd have been in town more, sure, but as far as your family is concerned you might as well be in *Florida* if you're only back in Hawkins to visit a girl."

She's not wrong, Jim thinks.

"Oh," Donnie says, clearly mortified. "I just... I thought you were

seeing each other."

"No, but that's okay. Hopper just offered to drive me home," Joyce says. "And speaking of: this is me right up here: seventy-five Wrightley drive."

Jim pulls right up into the driveway, cutting the engine. Joyce looks over at him with a raised eyebrow, but he leaves the keys in the ignition and steps out of the car. He starts to walk over to the passenger side, but Joyce must not realise he intends to get the door for her as she does it herself, shivering as she slips out into the frigid air.

He was half going to do it as a joke, half to be polite, but now he's remembering Henry Lloyd and that Joyce probably has never had a boy open her door for her, and he realises it's probably best that he didn't even half tease her.

But he does walk her to the door, shoulders hunched in his coat. Has the temperature dropped even more in the last five minutes? He shoves his hands in his pockets, stepping onto the stoop of the small one-story home, where at least the wind can't assault him.

"Thanks so much for the drive, Hop," Joyce says, fishing for her keys in the many pockets of her jacket. "I would probably have froze to death out here."

"No problem," he says. "Is your mom not home?"

She finds the key on an old Niagra falls souvenir keychain. "No, not until late. She works to close tonight, so I probably won't see her until tomorrow morning. I mean, ideally I won't see her until then," she says with a shrug. "So it's just me and Patchy tonight."

"Patchy?"

Joyce cocks her head. "I never told you about Patchy? Patchy the cat?"

A grin grows on his face. "No; you named your cat *Patchy*?"

"I was *eight*," she says. "He was a feral cat I found out back all beaten

up by something. Mom wasn't going to let me keep him but I just kept on trying to help him that eventually he just wouldn't go away. He's a crotchety old codger now, but not so bad." She fumbles with the keys. "I didn't realise I never told you about him."

"I'm sure I've been cheated of a number of great stories," he deadpans.

Joyce gives him a dry look over her shoulder as she opens the door. "He's a *good* cat. Anyway, I better let you go before you freeze to my doorstep. Thanks again for dropping me off, Hop. And happy Thanksgiving."

"Same to you."

Donnie has moved to the front seat when Jim gets back to the car. He gives his cousin a hard look. "Next time, maybe don't ask people you've just met if they're coming to Thanksgiving, huh?"

Donnie flushes, looking down in his lap. "I thought she was your girlfriend—when you were being all whispery I figured that's what that meant."

Jim chuckles, starting the car and peeling out of the driveway. "Yeah, well it's better not to assume, okay?"

He grumbles out an "okay," before perking up once more. "Well did you invite her over for any part of the weekend? If you're friends, then she could still come, right?"

"Why, do *you* have a crush on her?" Jim asks, lightly punching his cousin's leg. "She's a bit old for you."

"How old is she?"

"Sixteen," Jim answers. "And no, I didn't invite her over. We're friends but... I guess we're not that kind of friends." Even as he says it, it sounds strange. He can count on one hand the number of real conversations he's had with Joyce Horowitz outside of their alcove under the high school steps, but they talked about practically everything under the sun during those ritual smoke breaks. Hell, as of today she's cried in front of him, and he didn't even run the other way.

Still, they aren't *friends* like that. After all, she's still in high school while he's a grown man living in another city. That has to mean they can't really be *friends*.

"So she's two years older than me and two younger than you," Donnie says, crossing his arms. "That's not that weird."

"Well ask her out then," Jim says, thinking of how much he'd be willing to pay to be a fly on the wall for *that* conversation. "Ask her to the winter formal."

Donnie is quiet. "I don't have a crush on her," he admits. "Anyway, I'm just saying I thought you guys were cour—that you were involved. I didn't mean to be impolite."

Jim ruffles Donnie's hair, and the smaller boy is quiet. "Don't worry. Joyce is tough—she won't be offended."

Donnie nods, looking out the window. "It must be sad to be alone on Thanksgiving," he muses.

Jim drums his fingers on the gear shift. "She's not really alone," he says, thinking more of Patchy the cat than of Vera Horowitz. From all he's heard of that woman, Joyce would better enjoy Thanksgiving completely alone than with her.

"I guess." Donnie turns back to Jim, smiling. "I'm glad *we* have a big family to celebrate with, though."

Jim smiles too. "Me too, kiddo."

Back on Wrightley dr. Joyce Horowitz closes and locks her front door behind her, watching the Chevy drive away through the frosted glass. She goes to pet Patchy the cat, perched on the shoe rack, but the cat jumps down and walks away. Joyce smiles.

And she starts to cry.

6101719: Hope you enjoyed this chapter! It was super fun to write, and while I was working on some dynamic stuff I ended up basically planning a super loose outline for the next couple of one-shots I want

to do, which is exciting. Hopefully that means the next update won't be in too long!

On AO3 I posted this and asked about whether we *know* Hopper served in Vietnam or whether that's just a wiki superstition, and the response there was so good that I want to ask you guys a different question that I can't remember the answer to (guys, do NOT trust the wiki, it's super wrong about a lot of things): Do we know of what year it was when Lonnie left Joyce AND perhaps more importantly, do we know for sure that Lonnie left Joyce? His line in s1 to Jonathan about "maybe *I'm* not the asshole" makes me think it might be a bit more ambiguous about whether he left or was kicked out. I like the idea of Joyce kicking him out when things got too much, but I'm not totally sure which direction I want to go with that yet. And still, I'd love to stick to canon when possible.

Thanks, all. Much love.